SPEAKING LIKENSSES

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SPEAKING LIKENESSES

BY

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

WITH PICTURES THEREOF

BY

ARTHUR HUGHES

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TO MY

Dearest Mother,

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THE

STORIES

WITH WHICH SHE USED TO ENTERTAIN HER

CHILDREN.

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SPEAKING LIKENESSES.

Come sit round me, my dear little girls, and I will tell you a story. Each of you bring her sewing, and let Ella take pencils and colour-box, and try to finish some one drawing of the many she has begun. What Maude! pouting over that nice clean white stocking because it wants a darn? Put away your pout and pull out your needle, my dear; for pouts make a sad beginning to my story. And yet not an inappropriate beginning, as some of you may notice as

I go on. Silence! Attention! All eyes on occupations, not on me lest I should feel shy! Now I start my knitting and my story together.

Whoever saw Flora on her birthday morning, at half-past seven o'clock on that morning, saw a very pretty sight. Eight years old to a minute, and not awake yet. Her cheeks were plump and pink, her light hair was all tumbled, her little red lips were held together as if to kiss some one; her eyes also, if you could have seen them, were blue and merry, but for the moment they had gone fast asleep and out of sight under fat little eyelids. Wagga the dog was up and about, Muff the cat was up and about, chirping birds were up and about; or if they were mere nestlings and so could not go about (supposing, that is, that there were still a few nestlings so

far on in summer), at least they sat together wide awake in the nest, with wide open eyes and most of them with wide open beaks, which was all they could do: only sleepy Flora slept on, and dreamed on, and never stirred.

Her mother stooping over the child's soft bed woke her with a kiss. "Good morning, my darling, I wish you many and many happy returns of the day," said the

kind, dear mother: and Flora woke up to a sense of sunshine, and of pleasure full of hope. To be eight years old when last night one was merely seven, this is pleasure: to hope for birthday presents without any doubt of receiving some, this also is pleasure. And doubtless you now think so, my children, and it is quite right that so you should think: yet I tell you, from the sad knowledge of my older experience, that to every one of you a day will most likely come when sunshine, hope, presents and pleasure will be worth nothing to you in comparison with the unattainable gift of your mother's kiss.

On the breakfast table lay presents for Flora: a story-book full of pictures from her father, a writing-case from her mother, a gilt pincushion like a hedgehog from nurse, a box of sugar-plums and a doll from Alfred her brother and

Susan her sister; the most tempting of sugar-plums, the most beautiful of curly-pated dolls, they appeared in her eyes.

A further treat was in store. "Flora," said her mother, when admiration was at last silent and breakfast over: "Flora, I have asked Richard, George, Anne and Emily to spend the day with you and with Susan and Alfred. You are to be queen of the feast, because it is your birthday; and I trust you will all be very good and happy together."

Flora loved her brother and sister, her friend Emily, and her cousins Richard, George and Anne: indeed I think that with all their faults these children did really love each other. They had often played together before; and now if ever, surely on this so special occasion they would play pleasantly together. Well, we shall see.

Anne with her brothers arrived first: and Emily

having sent to ask permission, made her appearance soon after accompanied by a young friend, who was spending the holidays with her, and whom she introduced as Serena.

[What an odd name, Aunt!—Yes, Clara, it is not a common name, but I knew a Serena once; though she was not at all like this Serena, I am happy to say.]

Emily brought Flora a sweet-smelling nosegay; and Serena protested that Flora was the most charming girl she had ever met, except of course dearest Emily.

"Love me," said Serena, throwing her arms round her small hostess and giving her a clinging kiss: "I will love you so much if you will only let me love you."

The house was a most elegant house, the lawn was a perfect park, the elder brother and sister frightened her by their cleverness: so exclaimed

Serena: and for the moment silly little Flora felt quite tall and superior, and allowed herself to be loved very graciously.

After the arrivals and the settling down, there remained half-an-hour before dinner, during which to cultivate acquaintance and exhibit presents. Flora displayed her doll and handed round her sugar-plum box. "You took more than I did and it isn't fair," grumbled George at Richard: but Richard retorted, "Why, I saw you picking out the big ones." "Oh," whined Anne, "I'm sure there were no big ones left when they came to me." And Emily put in with a smile of superiority: "Stuff, Anne: you got the box before Serena and I did, and *we* don't complain." "But there wasn't one," persisted Anne. "But there were dozens and dozens," mimicked George, "only you're such a greedy little baby." "Not one," whimpered Anne. Then Serena

remarked soothingly: "The sugar-plums were most delicious, and now let us admire the lovely doll. Why, Flora, she must have cost pounds and pounds."

Flora, who had begun to look rueful, brightened up: "I don't know what she cost, but her name is Flora, and she has red boots with soles. Look at me opening and shutting her eyes, and I can make her say Mamma. Is she not a beauty?" "I never saw half such a beauty," replied smooth Serena. Then the party sat down to dinner.

Was it fact? Was it fancy? Each dish in turn was only fit to be found fault with. Meat underdone, potatoes overdone, beans splashy, jam tart not sweet enough, fruit all stone; covers clattering, glasses reeling, a fork or two dropping on the floor. Were these things really so? or would even finest strawberries and richest cream have

been found fault with, thanks to the children's mood that day?

[Were the dishes all wrong, Aunt?—I fancy not, Ella; at least, not more so than things often are in this world without upsetting every one's patience. But hear what followed.]

Sad to say, what followed was a wrangle. An hour after dinner blindman's buff in the garden began well and promised well: why could it not go on well? Ah, why indeed? for surely before now in that game toes have been trodden on, hair pulled, and small children overthrown. Flora fell down and accused Alfred of tripping her up, Richard bawled out that George broke away when fairly caught, Anne when held tight muttered that Susan could see in spite of bandaged eyes. Susan let go, Alfred picked up his little sister, George volunteered to play blindman in Susan's stead: but still pouting and

grumbling showed their ugly faces, and tossed the apple of discord to and fro as if it had been a pretty plaything.

[What apple, Aunt?—The Apple of Discord, Clara, which is a famous apple your brothers would know all about, and you may ask them some day. Now I go on.]

Would you like, any of you, a game at hide-and-seek in a garden, where there are plenty of capital hiding-places and all sorts of gay flowers to glance at while one goes seeking? I should have liked such a game, I assure you, forty years ago. But these children on this particular day could not find it in their hearts to like it. Oh dear no. Serena affected to be afraid of searching along the dusky yew alley unless Alfred went with her; and at the very same moment Flora was bent on having him lift her up to look down into a hollow tree in which it was quite obvious

Susan could not possibly have hidden. "It's my birthday," cried Flora; "it's my birthday." George and Richard pushed each other roughly about till one slipped on the gravel walk and grazed his hands, when both turned cross and left off playing. At last in sheer despair Susan stepped out of her hiding-place behind the summer-house: but even then she did her best to please everybody, for she brought in her hand a basket full of ripe mulberries which she had picked up off the grass as she stood in hiding.

Then they all set to running races across the smooth sloping lawn: till Anne tumbled down and cried, though she was not a bit hurt; and Flora, who was winning the race against Anne, thought herself ill-used and so sat and sulked. Then Emily smiled, but not good-naturedly, George and Richard thrust each a finger into

one eye and made faces at the two cross girls. Serena fanned herself, and Alfred looked at Susan, and Susan at Alfred, fairly at their wits' end.

An hour yet before tea-time: would another hour ever be over? Two little girls looking sullen, two boys looking provoking: the sight was not at all an encouraging one. At last Susan took pouting Flora and tearful Anne by the hand, and set off with them for a walk perforce about the grounds; whilst Alfred fairly dragged Richard and George after the girls, and Emily arm-in-arm with Serena strolled beside them.

The afternoon was sunny, shady, breezy, warm, all at once. Bees were humming and harvesting as any bee of sense must have done amongst so many blossoms: leafy boughs danced with their dancing shadows; bell flowers rang without clappers:—

[Could they, Aunt?—Well, not exactly, Maude: but you're coming to much more wonderful matters!]

Now and then a pigeon cooed its soft wat...-bottle note; and a long way off sheep stood bleating.

Susan let go the little hot hands she held, and began as she walked telling a story to which all her companions soon paid attention—all except Flora.

Poor little Flora: was this the end of her birthday? was she eight years old at last only for this? Her sugar-plums almost all gone and not cared for, her chosen tart not a nice one, herself so cross and miserable: is it really worth while to be eight years old and have a birthday, if this is what comes of it?

"—So the frog did not know how to boil the kettle; but he only replied: I can't bear hot

water," went on Susan telling her story. But Flora had no heart to listen, or to care about the frog. She lagged and dropped behind not noticed by any one, but creeping along slowly and sadly by herself.

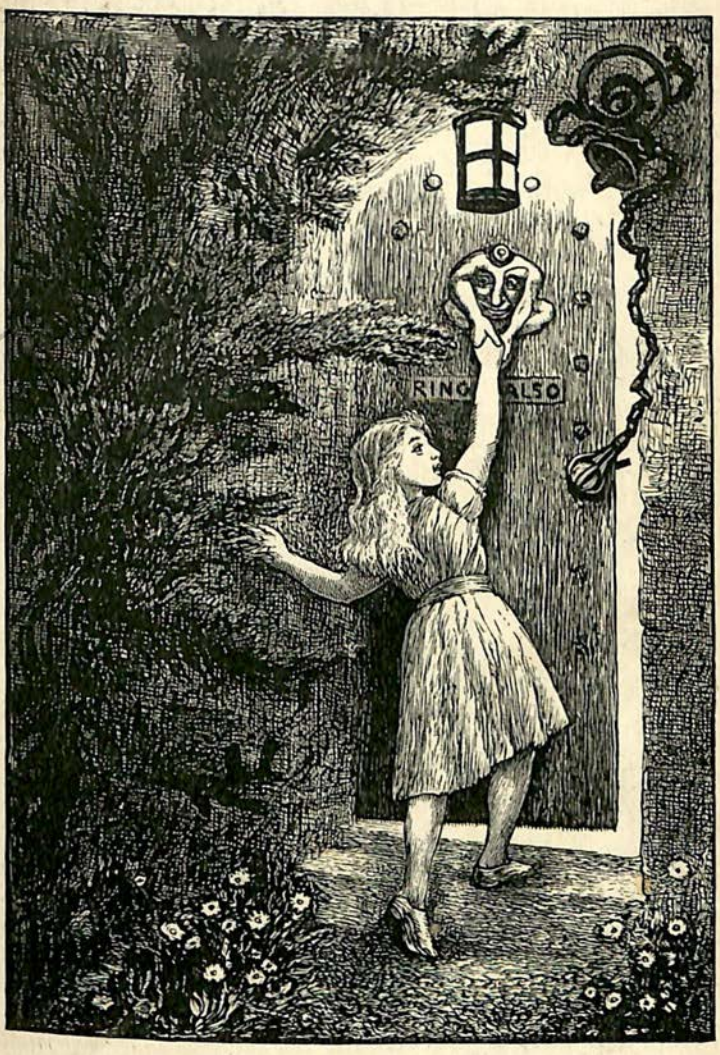
Down the yew alley she turned, and it looked dark and very gloomy as she passed out of the sunshine into the shadow. There were twenty yew trees on each side of the path, as she had counted over and over again a great many years ago when she was learning to count; but now at her right hand there stood twenty-one: and if the last tree was really a yew tree at all, it was at least a very odd one, for a lamp grew on its topmost branch. Never before either had the yew walk led to a door: but now at its further end stood a door with bell and knocker, and "Ring also" printed in black letters on a brass plate; all as plain as possible in the lamplight.

Flora stretched up her hand, and knocked and rang also.

She was surprised to feel the knocker shake hands with her, and to see the bell handle twist round and open the door. "Dear me," thought she, "why could not the door open itself instead of troubling the bell?" But she only said, "Thank you," and walked in.

The door opened into a large and lofty apartment, very handsomely furnished. All the chairs were stuffed arm-chairs, and moved their arms and shifted their shoulders to accommodate sitters. All the sofas arranged and rearranged their pillows as convenience dictated. Footstools glided about, and rose or sank to meet every length of leg. Tables were no less obliging, but ran on noiseless castors here or there when wanted. Tea-trays ready set out, saucers of strawberries, jugs of cream, and plates of cake, floated in, settled

down, and floated out again empty, with considerable tact and good taste: they came and went through a square hole high up in one wall, beyond which I presume lay the kitchen. Two harmoniums, an accordion, a pair of kettledrums and a peal of bells played concerted pieces behind a screen, but kept silence during conversation. Photographs and pictures made the tour of the apartment, standing still when glanced at and going on when done with. In case of need the furniture flattened itself against the wall, and cleared the floor for a game, or I dare say for a dance. Of these remarkable details some struck Flora in the first few minutes after her arrival, some came to light as time went on. The only uncomfortable point in the room, that is, as to furniture, was that both ceiling and walls were lined throughout with looking-glasses: but at first this did not strike Flora as any disadvantage;


RING
ALSO

indeed she thought it quite delightful, and took a long look at her little self full length.

[Jane and Laura, don't *quite* forget the pocket-handkerchiefs you sat down to hem. See how hard Ella works at her fern leaves, and what pains she is taking to paint them nicely. Yes, Maude, that darn will do: now your task is ended, but if I were you I would help Clara with hers.]

The room was full of boys and girls, older and younger, big and little. They all sat drinking tea at a great number of different tables; here half a dozen children sitting together, here more or fewer; here one child would preside all alone at a table just the size for one comfortably. I should tell you that the tables were like telescope tables; only they expanded and contracted of themselves without extra pieces, and seemed to study everybody's convenience.

Every single boy and every single girl stared hard at Flora and went on staring: but not one of them offered her a chair, or a cup of tea, or anything else whatever. She grew very red and uncomfortable under so many staring pairs

of eyes: when a chair did what it could to relieve her embarrassment by pressing gently against her till she sat down. It then bulged out its own back comfortably into hers, and drew in its arms to suit her small size. A footstool

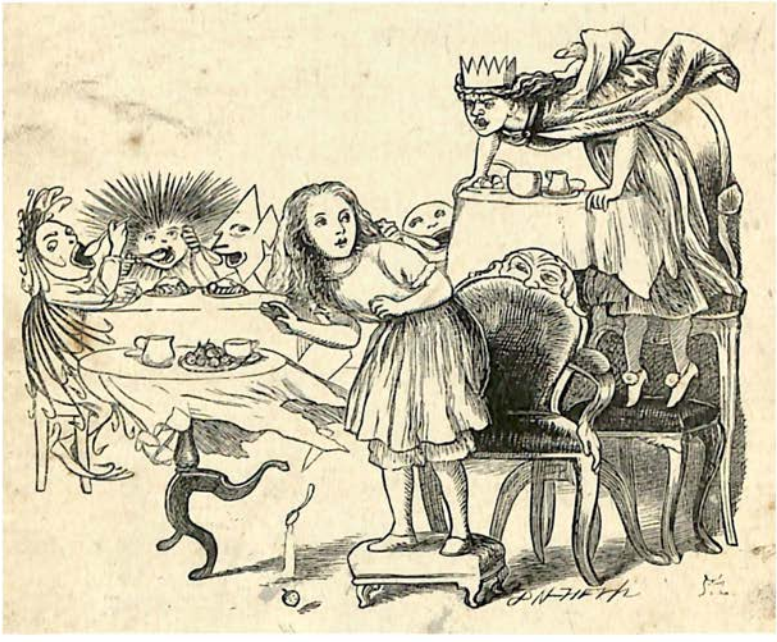
grew somewhat taller beneath her feet. A table ran up with tea for one; a cream-jug toppled over upon a saucerful of strawberries, and then righted itself again; the due quantity of sifted sugar sprinkled itself over the whole.

[How could it sprinkle itself?—Well, Jane, let us suppose it sprang up in its china basin like a fountain; and overflowed on one side only, but that of course the right side, whether it was right or left.]

Flora could not help thinking everyone very rude and ill-natured to go on staring without speaking, and she felt shy at having to eat with so many eyes upon her: still she was hot and thirsty, and the feast looked most tempting. She took up in a spoon one large, very large strawberry with plenty of cream; and was just putting it into her mouth when a voice called out crossly: "You shan't, they're mine." The spoon dropped

from her startled hand, but without any clatter: and Flora looked round to see the speaker.

[Who was it? Was it a boy or a girl?—Listen, and you shall hear, Laura.]



The speaker was a girl enthroned in an extra high armchair; with a stool as high as an ottoman under her feet, and a table as high as a chest of drawers in front of her. I suppose as she had

it so she liked it so, for I am sure all the furniture laid itself out to be obliging. Perched upon her hair she wore a coronet made of tinsel; her face was a red face with a scowl: sometimes perhaps she looked nice and pretty, this time she looked ugly. "You shan't, they're mine," she repeated in a cross grumbling voice: "it's my birthday, and everything is mine."

Flora was too honest a little girl to eat strawberries that were not given her: nor could she, after this, take even a cup of tea without leave. Not to tantalize her, I suppose, the table glided away with its delicious untasted load; whilst the armchair gave her a very gentle hug as if to console her.

If she could only have discovered the door Flora would have fled through it back into the gloomy yew-tree walk, and there have moped in solitude, rather than remain where she was not

made welcome: but either the door was gone, or else it was shut to and lost amongst the multitude of mirrors. The birthday Queen, reflected over and over again in five hundred mirrors, looked frightful, I do assure you: and for one minute I am sorry to say that Flora's fifty million-fold face appeared flushed and angry too; but she soon tried to smile good-humouredly and succeeded, though she could not manage to feel very merry.

[But, Aunt, how came she to have fifty million faces? I don't understand.—Because in such a number of mirrors there were not merely simple reflections, but reflections of reflections, and reflections of reflections of reflections, and so on and on and on, over and over again, Maude: don't you see?]

The meal was ended at last: most of the children had eaten and stuffed quite greedily;

poor Flora alone had not tasted a morsel. Then with a word and I think a kick from the Queen, her high footstool scudded away into a corner: and all the furniture taking the hint arranged itself as flat as possible round the room, close up against the walls.

[And across the door?—Why, yes, I suppose it may have done so, Jane: such active and willing furniture could never be in the way anywhere.—And was there a chimney corner?—No, I think not: that afternoon was warm we know, and there may have been a different apartment for winter. At any rate, as this is all make-believe, I say No. Attention!]

All the children now clustered together in the middle of the empty floor; elbowing and jostling each other, and disputing about what game should first be played at. Flora, elbowed and jostled in their midst, noticed points of appearance

that quite surprised her. Was it themselves, or was it their clothes? (only who indeed would wear such clothes, so long as there was another suit in the world to put on?) One boy bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine, and raised or depressed them at pleasure; but he usually kept them pointed outwards. Another instead of being rounded like most people was facetted at very sharp angles. A third caught in everything he came near, for he was hung round with hooks like fishhooks. One girl exuded a sticky fluid and came off on the fingers; another, rather smaller, was slimy and slipped through the hands. Such exceptional features could not but prove inconvenient, yet patience and forbearance might still have done something towards keeping matters smooth: but these unhappy children seemed not to know what forbearance was; and as to patience, they might have answered me nearly in the words

of a celebrated man—"Madam, I never saw patience."

[Who was the celebrated man, Aunt?—Oh, Clara, you an English girl and not know Lord Nelson! But I go on.]

"Tell us some new game," growled Hooks threateningly, catching in Flora's hair and tugging to get loose.

Flora did not at all like being spoken to in such a tone, and the hook hurt her very much. Still, though she could not think of anything new, she tried to do her best, and in a timid voice suggested "Les Grâces."

"That's a girl's game," said Hooks contemptuously.

"It's as good any day as a boy's game," retorted Sticky.

"I wouldn't give *that* for your girl's games," snarled Hooks, endeavouring to snap his fingers, but entangling two hooks and stamping.

"Poor dear fellow!" drawled Slime, affecting sympathy.

"It's quite as good," harped on Sticky: "It's as good or better."

Angles caught and would have shaken Slime, but she slipped through his fingers demurely.

"Think of something else, and let it be new," yawned Quills, with quills laid for a wonder.

"I really don't know anything new," answered Flora half crying: and she was going to add, "But I will play with you at any game you like, if you will teach me;" when they all burst forth into a yell of "Cry, baby, cry!—Cry, baby, cry!"—They shouted it, screamed it, sang it: they pointed fingers, made grimaces, nodded heads at her. The wonder was she did not cry outright.

At length the Queen interfered: "Let her alone; —who's she? It's *my* birthday, and we'll play at Hunt the Pincushion."

So Hunt the Pincushion it was. This game is simple and demands only a moderate amount of skill. Select the smallest and weakest player (if possible let her be fat: a hump is best of all), chase her round and round the room, overtaking her at short intervals, and sticking pins into her here or there as it happens: repeat, till you choose to catch and swing her; which concludes the game. Short cuts, yells, and sudden leaps give spirit to the hunt.

[Oh, Aunt, what a horrid game! surely there cannot be such a game?—Certainly not, Ella: yet I have seen before now very rough cruel play, if it can be termed play.—And did they get a poor little girl with a hump?—No, Laura, not this time: for]

The Pincushion was poor little Flora. How she strained and ducked and swerved to this side or that, in the vain effort to escape her tormentors!

Quills with every quill erect tilted against her, and needed not a pin: but Angles whose corners almost cut her, Hooks who caught and slit her frock, Slime who slid against and passed her, Sticky who rubbed off on her neck and plump bare arms, the scowling Queen, and the whole laughing scolding pushing troop, all wielded longest sharpest pins, and all by turns overtook her. Finally the Queen caught her, swung her violently round, let go suddenly,—and Flora losing her balance dropped upon the floor. But at least that game was over.

Do you fancy the fall jarred her? Not at all: for the carpet grew to such a depth of velvet pile below her, that she fell quite lightly.

Indeed I am inclined to believe that even in that dreadful sport of Hunt the Pincushion, Flora was still better off than her stickers: who in the thick of the throng exasperated each other and fairly maddened themselves by a free use of cutting

corners, pricking quills, catching hooks, glue, slime, and I know not what else. Slime, perhaps, would seem not so much amiss for its owner: but then if a slimy person cannot be held, neither can she hold fast. As to Hooks and Sticky they often in wrenching themselves loose got worse damage than they inflicted: Angles many times cut his own fingers with his edges: and I don't envy the individual whose sharp quills are flexible enough to be bent point inwards in a crush or a scuffle. The Queen must perhaps be reckoned exempt from particular personal pangs: but then, you see, it was her birthday! And she must still have suffered a good deal from the eccentricities of her subjects.

The next game called for was Self Help. In this no adventitious aids were tolerated, but each boy depended exclusively on his own resources. Thus pins were forbidden: but every natural

advantage, as a quill or fishhook, might be utilized to the utmost.

[Don't look shocked, dear Ella, at my choice of words; but remember that my birthday party is being held in the Land of Nowhere. Yet who knows whether something not altogether unlike it has not ere now taken place in the Land of Somewhere? Look at home, children.]

The boys were players, the girls were played (if I may be allowed such a phrase): all except the Queen who, being Queen, looked on, and merely administered a slap or box on the ear now and then to some one coming handy. Hooks, as a Heavy Porter, shone in this sport; and dragged about with him a load of attached captives, all vainly struggling to unhook themselves. Angles, as an Ironer, goffered or fluted several children by sustained pressure. Quills, an Engraver, could do little more than prick and scratch with some per-

manence of result. Flora falling to the share of Angles had her torn frock pressed and plaited after quite a novel fashion: but this was at any rate preferable to her experience as Pincushion, and she bore it like a philosopher.

Yet not to speak of the girls, even the boys did not as a body extract unmixed pleasure from Self Help; but much wrangling and some blows allayed their exuberant enjoyment. The Queen as befitted her lofty lot did, perhaps, taste of mirth unalloyed; but if so, she stood alone in satisfaction as in dignity. In any case, pleasure palls in the long run.

The Queen yawned a very wide loud yawn: and as everyone yawned in sympathy the game died out.

A supper table now advanced from the wall to the middle of the floor, and armchairs enough gathered round it to seat the whole party.

Through the square hole,—not, alas! through the door of poor Flora's recollection,—floated in the requisite number of plates, glasses, knives, forks, and spoons; and so many dishes and decanters filled with nice things as I certainly never saw in all my lifetime, and I don't imagine any of you ever did.

[How many children were there at supper?—Well, I have not the least idea, Laura, but they made quite a large party: suppose we say a hundreb thousand.]

This time Flora would not take so much as a fork without leave: wherefore as the Queen paid not the slightest attention to her, she was reduced to look hungrily on while the rest of the company feasted, and while successive dainties placed themselves before her and retired untasted. Cold turkey, lobster salad, stewed mushrooms, raspberry tart, cream cheese, a bumper of champagne, a

méringue, a strawberry ice, sugared pine apple, some greengages: it may have been quite as well for her that she did not feel at liberty to eat such a mixture: yet it was none the less tantalizing to watch so many good things come and go without taking even one taste, and to see all her companions stuffing without limit. Several of the boys seemed to think nothing of a whole turkey at a time: and the Queen consumed with her own mouth and of sweets alone one quart of strawberry ice, three pine apples, two melons, a score of méringues, and about four dozen sticks of angelica, as Flora counted.

After supper there was no need for the furniture to withdraw: for the whole birthday party trooped out through a door (but still not through Flora's door) into a spacious playground. What they may usually have played at I cannot tell you; but on this occasior a great number of bricks

happened to be lying about on all sides mixed up with many neat piles of stones, so the children began building houses: only instead of building from without as most bricklayers do, they built from within, taking care to have at hand plenty of bricks as well as good heaps of stones, and inclosing both themselves and the heaps as they built; one child with one heap of stones inside each house.

[Had they window panes at hand as well?—No, Jane, and you will soon see why none were wanted.]

I called the building material bricks: but strictly speaking there were no bricks at all in the playground, only brick-shaped pieces of glass instead. Each of these had the sides brilliantly polished; whilst the edges, which were meant to touch and join, were ground, and thus appeared to acquire a certain tenacity. There were bricks (so to call

them) of all colours and many different shapes and sizes. Some were fancy bricks wrought in open work, some were engraved in running patterns, others were cut into facets or blown into bubbles. A single house might have its blocks all uniform, or of twenty different fashions.

Yet, despite this amount of variety, every house built bore a marked resemblance to its neighbour: colours varied, architecture agreed. Four walls, no roof, no upper floor; such was each house: and it needed neither window nor staircase.

All this building occupied a long long time, and by little and little a very gay effect indeed was produced. Not merely were the glass blocks of beautiful tints; so that whilst some houses glowed like masses of ruby, and others shone like enormous chrysolites or sapphires, others again showed the milkiness and fiery spark of a hundred opals, or glimmered like moonstone: but the playground

was lighted up, high, low, and on all sides, with coloured lamps. Picture to yourselves golden twinkling lamps like stars high overhead, bluish twinkling lamps like glowworms down almost on the ground; lamps like illuminated peaches, apples, apricots, plums, hung about with the profusion of a most fruitful orchard. Should we not all have liked to be there with Flora, even if supper was the forfeit?

Ah no, not with Flora: for to her utter dismay she found that she was being built in with the Queen. She was not called upon to build: but gradually the walls rose and rose around her, till they towered clear above her head; and being all slippery with smoothness, left no hope of her ever being able to clamber over them back into the road home, if indeed there was any longer such a road anywhere outside. Her heart sank within her, and she could scarcely hold up her head. To

crown all, a glass house which contained no vestige even of a cupboard did clearly not contain a larder: and Flora began to feel sick with hunger and thirst, and to look forward in despair to no breakfast to-morrow.

Acoustics must have been most accurately studied,—

[But, Aunt, what are acoustics?—The science of sounds, Maude: pray now exercise your acoustical faculty.]

As I say, they must have been most accurately studied, and to practical purpose, in the laying out of this particular playground; if, that is, to hear distinctly everywhere whatever might be uttered anywhere within its limits, was the object aimed at. At any rate, such was the result.

Their residences at length erected, and their toils over, the youthful architects found leisure to gaze around them and bandy compliments.

First: "Look," cried Angles, pointing exultantly: "just look at Quills, as red as fire. Red doesn't become Quills. Quills's house would look a deal better without Quills."

"Talk of becomingness," laughed Quills, angrily, "you're just the colour of a sour gooseberry, Angles, and a greater fright than we've seen you yet. Look at him, Sticky, look whilst you have the chance:" for Angles was turning his green back on the speaker.

But Sticky—no wonder, the blocks *she* had fingered stuck together!—Sticky was far too busy to glance around; she was engrossed in making faces at Slime, whilst Slime returned grimace for grimace. Sticky's house was blue, and turned her livid: Slime's house—a very shaky one, ready to fall to pieces at any moment, and without one moment's warning:—Slime's house, I say, was amber-hued, and gave her the jaundice. These

advantages were not lost on the belligerents, who stood working each other up into a state of frenzy, and having got long past variety, now did nothing but screech over and over again: Slime: "You're a sweet beauty,"—and Sticky (incautious Sticky!): "You're another!"

Quarrels raged throughout the playground. The only silent tongue was Flora's.

Suddenly, Hooks, who had built an engraved house opposite the Queen's bubbled palace (both edifices were pale amethyst coloured, and trying to the complexion), caught sight of his fair neighbour, and, clapping his hands, burst out into an insulting laugh.

"You're another!" shrieked the Queen (the girls all alike seemed well-nigh destitute of invention). Her words were weak, but as she spoke she stooped: and clutched—shook—hurled—the first stone.

"Oh don't, don't, don't," sobbed Flora, clinging in a paroxysm of terror, and with all her weight, to the royal arm.

That first stone was, as it were, the first hail-stone of the storm: and soon stones flew in every direction and at every elevation. The very atmosphere seemed petrified. Stones clattered, glass shivered, moans and groans resounded on every side. It was as a battle of giants: who would excel each emulous peer, and be champion among giants?

The Queen. All that had hitherto whistled through mid-air were mere pebbles and chips compared with one massive slab which she now heaved up—poised—prepared to launch—

"Oh don't, don't, don't," cried out Flora again, almost choking with sobs. But it was useless. The ponderous stone spun on, widening an outlet through the palace wall on its way to crush Hooks.

Half mad with fear, Flora flung herself after it through the breach—

And in one moment the scene was changed. Silence from human voices and a pleasant coolness of approaching twilight surrounded her. High overhead a fleet of rosy grey clouds went sailing away from the west, and outstripping these, rooks on flapping black wings flew home to their nests in the lofty elm trees, and cawed as they flew. A few heat-drops pattered down on a laurel hedge hard by, and a sudden gust of wind ran rustling through the laurel leaves. Such dear familiar sights and sounds told Flora that she was sitting safe within the home precincts: yes, in the very yew-tree alley, with its forty trees in all, not one more, and with no mysterious door leading out of it into a hall of misery.

She hastened indoors. Her parents, with Alfred, Susan, and the five visitors, were just sitting down

round the tea-table, and nurse was leaving the drawing-room in some apparent perturbation.

Wagga wagged his tail, Muff came forward purring, and a laugh greeted Flora. "Do you know," cried George, "that you have been fast asleep ever so long in the yew walk, for I found you there? And now nurse was on her way to fetch you in, if you hadn't turned up."

Flora said not a word in answer, but sat down just as she was, with tumbled frock and hair, and a conscious look in her little face that made it very sweet and winning. Before tea was over, she had nestled close up to Anne, and whispered how sorry she was to have been so cross.

And I think if she lives to be nine years old and give another birthday party, she is likely on that occasion to be even less like the birthday Queen of her troubled dream than was the Flora of eight years old: who, with dear friends and

playmates and pretty presents, yet scarcely knew how to bear a few trifling disappointments, or how to be obliging and good-humoured under slight annoyances.

"Aunt, Aunt!"

"What, girls?"

"Aunt, do tell us the story of the frog who couldn't boil the kettle."

"But I was not there to hear Susan tell the story."

"Oh, but you know it, Aunt."

"No, indeed I do not. I can imagine reasons why a frog would not and should not boil a kettle, but I never heard any such stated."

"Oh, but try. You know, Aunt, you are always telling *us* to try."

"Fairly put, Jane, and I will try, on condition that you all help me with my sewing."

"But we got through our work yesterday."

"Very well, Maude, as you like: only no help no story. I have too many poor friends ever to get through *my* work. However, as I see thimbles coming out, I conclude you choose story and labour. Look, these breadths must be run together, three and three. Ella, if you like to go to your music, don't stay listening out of ceremony: still, if you do stay, here are plenty of buttonholes to overcast. Now are we all seated and settled? Then listen. The frog and his peers will have to talk, of course; but that seems a marvel scarcely worth mentioning after Flora's experience."

Edith and a teakettle were spending one warm afternoon together in a wood. Before proceeding with my story, let me introduce each personage to you more particularly.

The wood should perhaps be called a grove rather than a wood, but in Edith's eyes it looked no less than a forest. About a hundred fine old beech-trees stood together, with here and there an elegant silver birch drooping in their midst. Besides these there was one vine which, by some freak, had been planted near the centre of the group, and which, year after year, trailing its long graceful branches over at least a dozen neighbours, dangled bunches of pale purple grapes among its leaves and twisted tendrils. The kettle was of brilliant copper, fitted up with a yellow glass handle: it was also on occasion a pleasing singer. Edith was a little girl who thought herself by no means such a very little girl, and at any rate as wise as her elder brother, sister, and nurse. I should be afraid to assert that she did not reckon herself as wise as her parents: but we must hope not, for her own sake.

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The loving mother had planned a treat for her family that afternoon. A party of friends and relations were to assemble in the beech-wood, and partake of a gipsy tea: some catch-singing might be managed, cold supper should be laid indoors, and if the evening proved very delightful, the open-air entertainment might be prolonged till full-moonrise.

Preparations were intrusted to nurse's care, others of the household working under her, and she promising to go down to the beeches at least half an hour before the time fixed for the party, to see that all was ready. An early dinner throughout the house and no lessons in the schoolroom set the afternoon free for the gipsy feast.

After dinner Edith dressed her doll in its best clothes, tied on its broad-brimmed hat and veil, and hooked a miniature parasol into its waistband. Her sister was busy arranging flowers for the

supper-table, her brother was out taking a walk, nurse was deep in jams, sandwiches, and delicacies in general; for nurse, though going by her old name, and still doing all sorts of things for her old baby, was now in fact housekeeper.

None of these could bestow much attention on Edith, who, doll in arm, strolled along into the kitchen, and there paused to watch cook rolling puff paste at her utmost speed. Six dozen patty-pans stood in waiting, and yawned as they waited.

Edith set down her doll on the window-seat and began to talk, whilst cook, with a good-natured red face, made her an occasional random answer, right or wrong as it happened.

"What are we to have besides sandwiches and tarts?"

"Cold fowls, and a syllabub, and champagne, and tea and coffee, and potato-rolls, and lunns, and tongue, and I can't say what besides."

"Where are the fowls, cook?"

"In the larder, where they ought to be, Miss Edith, not lying about in a hot kitchen."

"Do you like making tarts?"

"I like tarts, but not often."

"Cook, you're not attending to what I say."

"No, the attendance is just what I should not have liked."

Edith looked about till a bright copper kettle on a shelf caught her eye. "Is that the kettle for tea?"

"Yes, miss."

The doll gazing out of window was forgotten, while, mounting on a stool, Edith reached down the kettle.

"I will carry the kettle out ready."

"The fire will have to be lighted first," answered cook, as she hurried her tarts into the oven, and

ran out to fetch curled parsley from the kitchen-garden.

"I can light the fire," called out Edith after her, though not very anxious to make herself heard: and thus it happened that cook heard nothing beyond the child's voice saying something or other of no consequence.

So Edith found a box of lucifers, and sallied forth kettle in hand. Striking on the burnished copper, the sun's rays transformed that also into a resplendent portable sun of dazzling aspect. The beautiful sunshine bathed garden, orchard, field, lane and wood; bathed flower, bush and tree; bathed bird, beast and butterfly. Frisk, the Newfoundland dog, and Cosy, the Persian cat, meeting their young mistress, turned round, to give her their company. Crest, the cockatoo, taking a constitutional on the lawn, fluttered up to her shoulder and perched there. The four went

on together, Frisk carrying the kettle in his mouth, and Crest pecking at the match-box. Several lucifers dropped out, and not more than six reached their destination.

Edith knew that the gipsy party was to be held just where the vine grew, and thither she directed her steps. A pool, the only pool in the wood, gleamed close at hand, and mirrored in its still depths the lights, shadows, and many greens

of beech-tree, birch-tree, and vine. How she longed for a cluster of those purple grapes which, hanging high above her head, swung to and fro with every breath of wind; now straining a tendril, now displacing a leaf, now dipping towards her but never within reach. Still, as Edith was such a very wise girl, we must not suppose she would stand long agape after unattainable grapes: nor did she. Her business just then was to boil a kettle, and to this she bent her mind.

Three sticks and a hook dependent therefrom suggested a tripod erected for the kettle: and so it was.

[Why a tripod, Aunt?—I have been wondering at the no remarks, but here comes one at last. Three sticks, Maude, are the fewest that can stand up firmly by themselves; two would tumble down, and four are not wanted. The reel? here it is: and then pass it to Clara.]

Within the legs of the tripod lay a fagot, supported on some loose bricks. The fagot had been untied, but otherwise very little disturbed.

By standing on the fagot, Edith made herself more than tall enough to hang the kettle on its hook: then jumping down she struck her first match. A flash followed; and in one instant the match went out, as might have been expected in the open air and with no shelter for the flame. She struck a second lucifer, with the like result: a third, a fourth, with no better success. After this it was high time to ponder well before sacrificing a fifth match; for two only remained in the broken box.

Edith sat down to reflect, and stayed quiet so long, with her cheek leaning on her hand and her eyes fixed on a lucifer, that the aborigines of the wood grew bold and gathered round her.

[Who were the aborigines, Aunt?—The natives

of the wood, Laura; the creatures born and bred there generation after generation.]

A squirrel scampered down three boughs lower on the loftiest beech-tree, and cracked his beech-mast audibly. A pair of wood pigeons advanced making polite bows. A mole popped a fleshy nose and a little human hand out of his burrow—popped them in, and popped them out again. A toad gazed deliberately round him with his eye like a jewel. Two hedgehogs came along and seated themselves near the toad. A frog—

[*The* frog, Aunt?—Yes, Laura,]

—*the* frog hopped at a leisurely pace up the pond bank, and squatted among the long grasses at its edge.

The wonder is that Frisk, Cosy, and Crest, let this small fry come and go at pleasure and unmolested; but, whatever their motive may have been, they did so. They sat with great gravity

right and left of their mistress, and kept themselves to themselves.

Edith's situation had now become, as it seems to me, neither pleasant nor dignified. She had volunteered to boil a kettle, and could not succeed even in lighting a fire. Her relations, friends, and other natural enemies would be arriving, and would triumph over her: for if her fire would not light, her kettle would certainly never boil. She took up the fifth lucifer and prepared to strike—paused—laid it back in the box: for it was her last but one. She sat on thinking what to do, yet could think of nothing to the purpose: of nothing better, that is, than of striking the match and running the risk. What should she do?

She had not even so much as half an eye to spare for the creatures around her, whilst they on their side concentrated their utmost attention on her.

The pigeons left off bowing: the squirrel did not fetch a second beechmast.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Edith at last; "what shall I do?"

Two voices, like two gurgling bottles, answered, "Couldn't you fly away, dear?" and the two pigeons bowed like one pigeon.

Edith was so thoroughly preoccupied by her troubles as to have very little room left in her mind for surprise: still, she did just glance at the pigeons before answering, "I wish you'd advise something sensible, instead of telling me to fly without wings."

"If you can only get so much as one twig to light," called out the squirrel hopefully, "I'll fan the flame with my tail."

"Ah," retorted Edith, "but that's just it: how am I to light the first twig with lucifers that do nothing but go out?"

A pause. "What should you say," suggested the mole, rubbing his hands together, "to my rearranging the sticks?"

"Very well," answered Edith, "do what you please." But she looked as if she did not expect much good to result from the mole's co-operation.

However, the mole clambered up one of the bricks, and then by pushing and pulling with his handy little hands, really did arrange the sticks in a loose heap full of hollows and tunnels for admitting currents of air; and so far matters looked promising.

The two hedgehogs sat silent and staring; why they came and why they stayed never appeared from first to last; but the frog hopped past them, and enquired, with a sudden appearance of interest, "Does not the kettle want filling?" No one noticed what he said, so he added under his breath, "Perhaps it is full already."

[Was it full, Aunt?—No, Maude, there was not a drop in it: so after all it was fortunate that it hung above black sticks instead of over a blazing fire, or it would soon have been spoilt. Remember, girls, never put an empty kettle on the fire, or you and it will rue the consequence.]

The toad peered with his bright eye in among the sticks. "I should vote," said he mildly, "that the next lucifer be held and struck inside the heap, to protect the spark from draughts."

[How came the toad to be so much cleverer than his neighbours, Aunt? — Well, Jane, I suppose such a bright thought may have occurred to him rather than to the rest, because toads so often live inside stones: at least, so people have said. And suppose his father, grandfather and great-grandfather all inhabited stones, the idea of doing everything inside something may well have come naturally to him.]

The toad's suggestion roused Edith from despondency to action. She knelt down by the tripod, although just there the ground was sprinkled with brickdust and sawdust; thrust both hands in amongst the wood, struck a match, saw it flash,—and die out. "Try again," whispered the toad; and as she could devise no better plan she tried again.

This sixth and last venture was crowned with success. One twig caught fire, as a slight crackling followed by a puff of smoke attested. The squirrel took his seat on a brick and whisked his tail to and fro. The hedgehogs turning their backs on the smoke, sniffed in the opposite direction; waiting as I suppose for the event, though they showed not the least vestige of interest in it.

"Now," cried the frog hopping up and down in his excitement and curiosity, "Now to boil the kettle."

But that first spark of success was followed by a dim, smoky, fitful smouldering which gave merely the vaguest promise of a coming blaze. A pair of bellows would have answered far better than the squirrel's tail: and though, with a wish to oblige, the two wood-pigeons fluttered round and round the tripod, they did not the slightest good.

Just then a fox bustled up, and glanced askance at Frisk: but receiving a reassuring and friendly nod, joined the party under the shady vine-branches. This fox was a tidy person, and like most foxes always carried about a brush with him: so without more ado he went straight up to Edith, and gave her dusty frock a thorough brushing all round. Next he wrapped his fore paws about the vine, and shook it with all his force; but as no grapes fell, though several bunches bobbed up and down and seemed ready

to drop into his mouth, he gave one leap upwards off all four feet at once towards the lowest cluster he could spy; this also failing he shook his head, turned up his nose, shrugged his shoulders, muttered, "They must be sour" (and this once I suspect the fox was right), trotted away, and was soon lost to view among the beech-trees.

"Now," cried the frog once more, "now for the kettle."

"Boil it yourself," retorted Edith.

So the frog did not know how to boil the kettle, but he only replied, "I can't bear hot water." This you may remark was a startling change of tone in the frog: but I suppose he was anxious to save his credit. Now if he had only taken time to look at what was under his very eyes, he might have saved his credit without belying his principles: for

The fire had gone out!

And here my story finishes: except that I will just add how

As Edith in despair sat down to cry,

As the pigeons withdrew bowing and silent,

As the squirrel scudded up his beech-tree again,

As the mole vanished underground,

As the toad hid himself behind a toadstool,

As the two hedgehogs yawned and went away yawning,

As the frog dived,

As Frisk wagged, Cosy purred, and Crest murmured, "Pretty Cockatoo," to console their weeping mistress,

Nurse arrived on the ground with a box of lucifers in one hand, two fire-wheels in the other, and half-a-dozen newspapers under her arm, and exclaimed, "Oh, my dear child, run

indoors as fast as you can: for your mother, father, brother and sister are hunting up and down all over the house looking for you; and cook is half out of her wits because she cannot find the kettle."

"My dear children, what is all this mysterious whispering about?"

"It's Jane, Aunt."

"Oh, Maude, I'm sure it's you quite as much."

"Well then, Jane and Maude, what is it?"

"We were only saying that both your stories are summer stories, and we want you to tell us a winter story some day. That's all, Aunty dear."

"Very well, Maudy dear; but don't say 'only,' as if I were finding fault with you. If Jane and you wish for a winter story, my next shall freeze hard. What! now? You really do allow me very little time for invention!"

"And please, Aunt, be wonderful."

"Well, Laura, I will try to be wonderful; but I cannot promise first-rate wonders on such extremely short notice. Ella, you sitting down too? Here is my work for you all, the same as yesterday, and here comes my story."

Old Dame Margaret kept the village fancy shop. Her window was always filled with novelties and attractions, but about Christmastide, it put forth extra splendours, and as it were blossomed gorgeously. Flora's doll, her sugar-plum box and hedgehog pincushion, came I should say from this very window; and though her hoops and sticks for *les grâces* can scarcely have looked smart enough for a place of honour, they emerged probably from somewhere behind the counter?

[Did Edith's doll come out of the window too?—Yes, Clara, if Flora's did I have no doubt

Edith's did; for as they say in the Arabian Nights, "each was more beautiful than the other."]

In spite of her gay shop, Dame Margaret was no fine lady, but a nice simple old woman who wore plain clothes, and made them last a long time: and thus it was that over and over again she found money to give or lend among her needy neighbours. If a widow's cow died, or a labourer's cottage was burnt down, or if half-a-dozen poor children were left orphans, Dame Margaret's purse would be the first to open, and the last to shut; though she was very cautious as to helping idlers who refused to help themselves, or drunkards who would only do more harm with more money.

I dare say her plain clothes and her plain table (for she kept a plain table too) were what enabled her, amongst other good deeds, to take home little Maggie, her orphan granddaughter, when the child was left almost without kith or kin to care for her.

These two were quite alone in the world: each was the other's only living relation, and they loved each other very dearly.

Hour after hour on Christmas Eve, business raged in Dame Margaret's shop. I shrink from picturing to myself the run on burnt almonds, chocolate, and "sweeties" of every flavour, all done up in elegant fancy boxes; the run on wax dolls, wooden dolls, speaking dolls, squeaking dolls; the run on woolly lambs and canaries with removable heads; the run on everything in general. Dame Margaret and Maggie at her elbow had a busy time behind their counter, I do assure you.

[Did Maggie serve too?—Yes, Jane; and it was her delight to run up steps and reach down goods from high shelves.]

About three o'clock, the shop happened for a moment to be empty of customers, and Dame Margaret was glancing complacently round upon

her diminished stock, when her eye lighted on some parcels which had been laid on a chair and forgotten. "Oh dear, Maggie," exclaimed she, "the doctor's young ladies have left behind them all the tapers for their Christmas tree, and I don't know what besides." Now that doctor resided with his family in a large house some distance out of the village, and the road to it lay through the outskirts of an oak forest.

"Let me take them, Granny," cried Maggie eagerly: "and perhaps I may get a glimpse of the Christmas tree."

"But it will soon be dark."

"Oh, Granny, I will make haste: do, please, let me go."

So kind Dame Margaret answered, "Yes; only be sure to make great haste:" and then she packed up the forgotten parcels very carefully in a basket. Not merely the red tapers, but a pound of vanilla

chocolate, a beautiful bouncing ball, and two dozen crackers, had all been left behind.

Basket on arm, Maggie started for the doctor's house: and as she stepped out into the cold open air it nipped her fingers and ears, and little pug-nose. Cold? indeed it was cold, for the thermometer marked *half-a-dozen* degrees of frost; every pond and puddle far and near was coated with thick sheet ice, or turned to block ice from top to bottom; every branch of every bare oak shivered in a keen east wind. How the poor little birds kept warm, or whether in fact any did keep warm on the leafless boughs, I cannot tell: I only know that many a thrush and sparrow died of cold that winter, whilst robin redbreast begged crumbs at cottage windows. His snug scarlet waistcoat could scarcely keep hungry robin's heart warm; and I am afraid to think about his poor little pretty head with its bright eye.

Maggie set off on her journey with a jump and a run, and very soon got a fall: for without any suspicion of what awaited her she set her foot on a loose lump of ice, and down she went, giving the back of her head a sounding thump. She was up again directly, and ran on as if nothing had happened; but whether her brain got damaged by the blow, or how else it may have been, I know not; I only know that the thwack seemed in one moment to fill the atmosphere around her with sparks, flames and flashes of lightning; and that from this identical point of time commenced her marvellous adventures.

Were the clouds at play? they went racing across the sky so rapidly! Were the oaks at play? they tossed their boughs up and down in such rattling confusion! Maggie on her travels began to think that she too should dearly like a game of play, when an opening in the forest disclosed to her

a green glade, in which a party of children were sporting together in the very freest and easiest manner possible.

Such a game! Such children! If they had not been children they must inevitably have been grasshoppers. They leaped over oaks, wrestled in mid-air, bounded past a dozen trees at once; two and two they spun round like whirlwinds; they darted straight up like balloons; they tossed each other about like balls. A score of dogs barking and gambolling in their midst were evidently quite unable to keep up with them.

[Didn't they all get very hot, Aunt?—Very hot indeed, Maude, I should think.]

The children's cheeks were flushed, their hair streamed right out like comets' tails; you might have heard and seen their hearts beat, and yet no one appeared in the least out of breath. Positively

they had plenty of breath amongst them to time their game by singing.

"One, two, three," they sang,—

"One, two, three," they sang,—

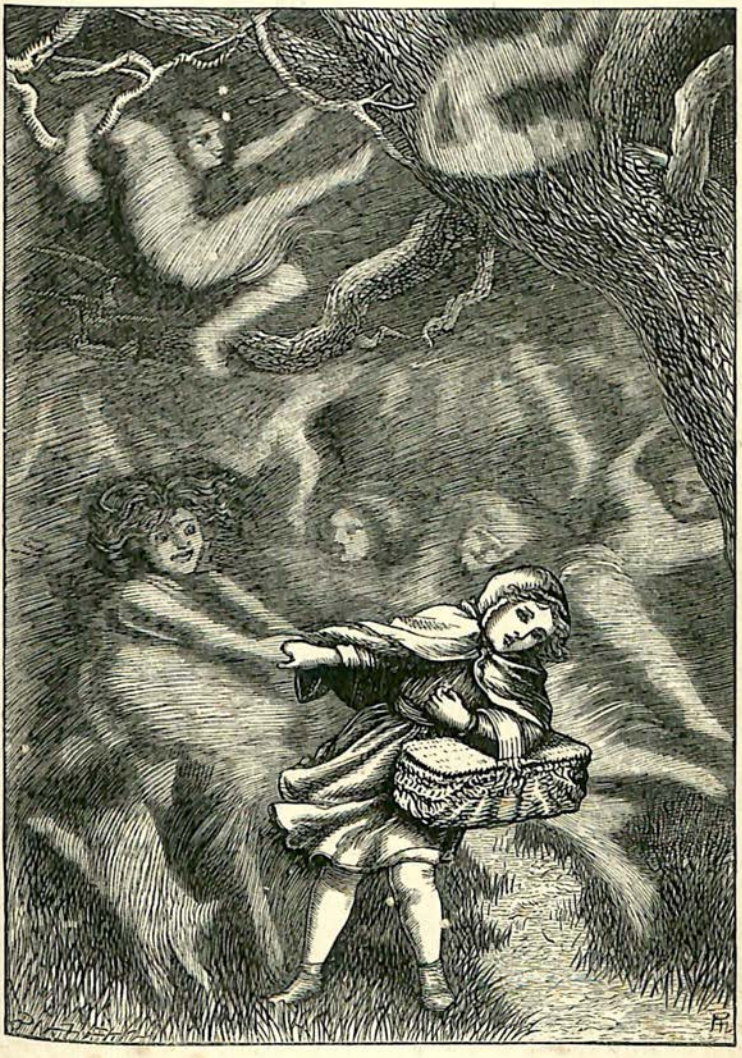
"One, two, three," they sang, "and away,"—as they all came clustering like a swarm of wasps round astonished Maggie.

How she longed for a game with them! She had never in her life seen anything half so funny, or so sociable, or so warming on a cold day. And we must bear in mind that Maggie had no playfellows at home, and that cold winter was just then at its very coldest. "Yes," she answered eagerly; "yes, yes; what shall we play at?"

A glutinous-looking girl in pink cotton velvet proposed: "Hunt the pincushion."

"No, Self Help," bawled a boy clothed in something like porcupine skin.

[Oh, Aunt, are these those monstrous children



over again?—Yes, Ella, you really can't expect me not to utilize such a brilliant idea twice.]

"No, running races," cried a second girl, wriggling forward through the press like an eel.

"No, this,"—"No, that,"—"No, the other," shouted every one in general, bounding here, spinning there, jumping up, clapping hands, kicking heels, in a tempest of excitement.

"Anything you please," panted Maggie, twirling and leaping in emulation, and ready to challenge the whole field to a race; when suddenly her promise to make haste crossed her mind—her fatal promise, as it seemed to her; though you and I, who have as it were peeped behind the scenes, may well believe that it kept her out of no very delightful treat.

She ceased jumping, she steadied her swinging basket on her arm, and spoke resolutely though

sadly: "Thank you all, but I mustn't stop to play with you, because I promised Granny to make haste. Good-bye;"—and off she started, not venturing to risk her decision by pausing or looking back; but feeling the bouncing ball bounce in her basket as if it too longed for a game, and hearing with tingling ears a shout of mocking laughter which followed her retreat.

The longest peal of laughter comes to an end. Very likely, as soon as Maggie vanished from view among the oak-trees the boisterous troop ceased laughing at her discomfiture; at any rate, they did not pursue her; and she soon got beyond the sound of their mirth, whilst one by one the last echoes left off laughing and hooting at her. Half glad that she had persisted in keeping her word, yet half sorry to have missed so rare a chance, Maggie trudged on solitary and sober. A pair of wood-pigeons alighting almost at her feet pecked about

in the frozen path, but could not find even one mouthful for their little empty beaks: then, hopeless and silent, they fluttered up and perched on a twig above her head. The sight of these hungry creatures made Maggie hungry from sympathy; yet it was rather for their sakes than for her own that she lifted the cover of her basket and peered underneath it, to see whether by any chance kind Granny had popped in a hunch or so of cake,—alas! not a crumb. Only there lay the chocolate, sweet and tempting, looking most delicious through a hole in its gilt paper.

Would birds eat chocolate, wondered Maggie,—

[Would they, Aunt?—Really, I hardly know myself, Laura: but I should suppose some might, if it came in their way.]

—and she was almost ready to break off the least little corner and try, when a sound of rapid footsteps coming along startled her; and

hastily shutting her basket, she turned to see who was approaching.

A boy: and close at his heels marched a fat tabby cat, carrying in her mouth a tabby kitten. Or was it a real boy? He had indeed arms, legs, a head, like ordinary people: but his face exhibited only one feature, and that was a wide mouth. He had no eyes; so how he came to know that Maggie and a basket were standing in his way I cannot say: but he did seem somehow aware of the fact; for the mouth, which could doubtless eat as well as speak, grinned, whined, and accosted her: "Give a morsel to a poor starving beggar."

"I am very sorry," replied Maggie, civilly; and she tried not to stare, because she knew it would be rude to do so, though none the less amazed was she at his aspect; "I am very sorry, but I have nothing I can give you."

"*Nothing*, with all that chocolate!"

"The chocolate is not mine, and I cannot give it you," answered Maggie bravely: yet she felt frightened; for the two stood all alone together in

the forest, and the wide mouth was full of teeth and tusks, and began to grind them.

"Give it me, I say. I tell you I'm starving:" and he snatched at the basket.

"I don't believe you are starving," cried Maggie, indignantly, for he looked a great deal stouter and sleeker than she herself did; and she started aside, hugging her basket close as the beggar darted out a lumpish-looking hand to seize it. "I'm hungry enough myself, but I wouldn't be a thief!" she shouted back to her tormentor, whilst at full speed she fled away from him, wondering secretly why he did not give chase, for he looked big enough and strong enough to run her down in a minute: but after all, when she spoke so resolutely and seemed altogether so determined, it was he that hung his head, shut his mouth, and turned to go away again faster and faster, till he fairly scudded out of sight among the lengthening shadows.

Had this forest road always been so long? Never before certainly had it appeared so extremely long to Maggie. Hungry and tired, she lost all spirit, and plodded laggingly forward, longing for her

journey's end, but without energy enough to walk fast. The sky had turned leaden, the wind blew bleaker than ever, the bare boughs creaked and rattled drearily. Poor desolate Maggie! drowsiness was creeping over her, and she began to wish above all things that she might just sit down where she stood and go fast asleep: never mind food, or fire, or bed; only let her sleep.

[Do you know, children, what would most likely have happened to Maggie if she had yielded to drowsiness and slept out there in the cold?—What, Aunt?—Most likely she would never have woke again. And then there would have been an abrupt end to my story.]

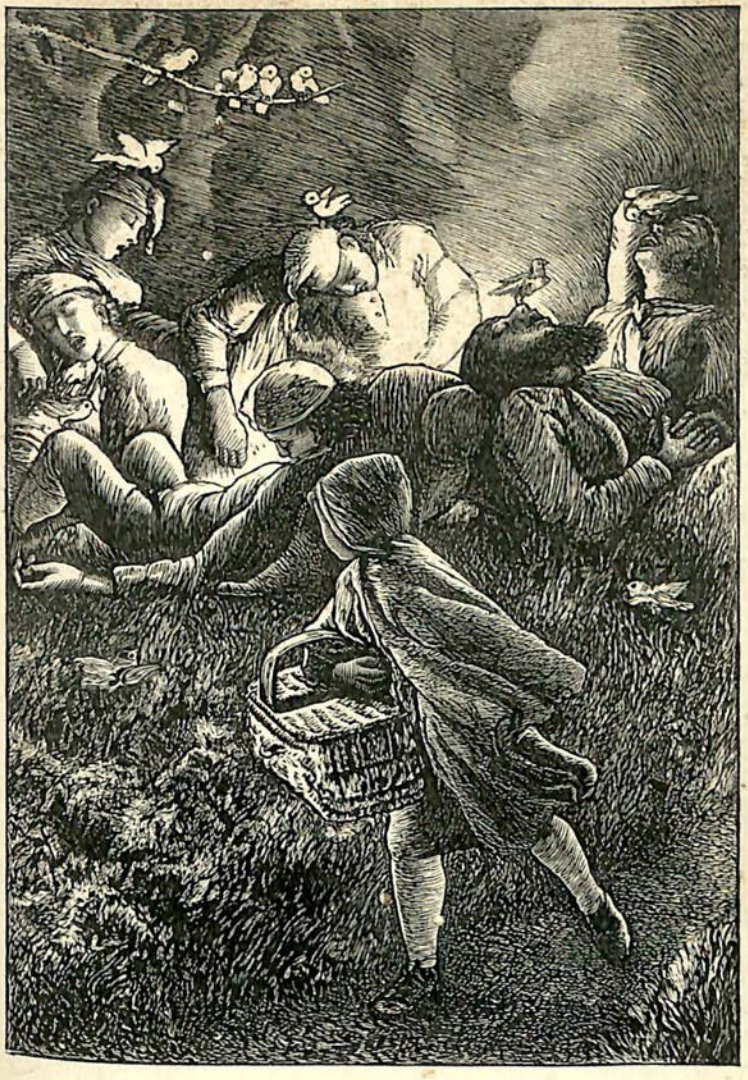
Yet she recollected her promise to make haste, and went toiling on and on and on, step after tired step. At length she had so nearly passed through the forest that five minutes more would bring her out into the by-road which led straight

to the doctor's door, when she came suddenly upon a party of some dozen persons sitting toasting themselves around a glowing gipsy fire, and all yawning in nightcaps or dropping asleep.

They opened their eyes half-way, looked at her, and shut them again. They all nodded. They all snored. Whoever woke up yawned; whoever slept snored. Merely to see them and hear them was enough to send one to sleep.

A score or so of birds grew bold, hopped towards the kindly fire, and perched on neighbouring shoulder, hand, or nose. No one was disturbed, no one took any notice.

If Maggie felt drowsy before, she felt ready to drop now: but remembering her promise, and rousing herself by one last desperate effort, she shot past the tempting group. Not a finger stirred to detain her, not a voice proffered a word, not a foot moved, not an eye winked.



At length the cold long walk was ended, and Maggie stood ringing the doctor's door-bell, wide awake and on tiptoe with enchanting expectation: for surely now there was a good prospect of her being asked indoors, warmed by a fire, regaled with something nice, and indulged with a glimpse of the Christmas tree bending under its crop of wonderful fruit.

Alas, no! The door opened, the parcel was taken in with a brief "Thank you," and Maggie remained shut out on the sanded doorstep.

Chilled to the bone, famished, cross, and almost fit to cry with disappointment, Maggie set off to retrace her weary steps. Evening had closed in, the wind had lulled, a few snowflakes floated about in the still air and seemed too light to settle down. If it looked dim on the open road, it looked dimmer still in the forest: dim, and solitary, and comfortless.

Were all the sleepers gone clean away since Maggie passed scarcely a quarter of an hour before? Surely, yes: and moreover not a trace of their glowing fire remained, not one spark, not one ember. Only something whitish lay on the ground where they had been sitting: could it be a night-cap? Maggie stooped to look, and picked up, not a nightcap, but a wood-pigeon with ruffled feathers and closed eyes, which lay motionless and half frozen in her hand. She snuggled it tenderly to her, and kissed its poor little beak and drooping head before she laid it to get warm within the bosom of her frock. Lying there, it seemed to draw anger and discontent out of her heart: and soon she left off grumbling to herself, and stepped forward with renewed energy, because the sooner the pigeon could be taken safe indoors out of the cold, the better.

Mew, mew, mew: such a feeble pitiful squeak

of a mew! Just about where the Mouth had met her a mew struck upon Maggie's ear, and wide she opened both ears and eyes to spy after the mewer. Huddled close up against the gnarled root of an oak, crouched a small tabby kitten all alone, which mewed and mewed and seemed to beg for aid. Maggie caught up the helpless creature, popped it into her empty basket, and hurried forward.

But not far, before she paused afresh: for suddenly, just in that green glade where the grasshopper children in general and one glutinous girl in particular had stood hooting her that very afternoon, her foot struck against some soft lump, which lay right in her path and made no effort to move out of harm's way. What could it be? She stooped, felt it, turned it over, and it was a short-haired smooth puppy, which put one paw confidingly into her hand, and took the tip of her little

finger between its teeth with the utmost friendliness. Who could leave such a puppy all abroad on such a night? Not Maggie, for one. She added the puppy to her basketful,—and a basketful it was then!—and ran along singing quite merrily under her burden.

And when, the forest shades left behind her, she went tripping along through the pale clear moonlight, in one moment the sky before her flashed with glittering gold, and flushed from horizon to zenith with a rosy glow; for the northern lights came out, and lit up each cloud as if it held lightning, and each hill as if it smouldered ready to burst into a volcano. Every oak-tree seemed turned to coral, and the road itself to a pavement of dusky carnelian.

Then at last she once more mounted a door-step and rang a door-bell, but this time they were the familiar step and bell of home. So now when the

door opened she was received, not with mere "Thank you," but with a loving welcoming hug; and not only what she carried, but she herself also found plenty of light and warmth awaiting all

arrivals, in a curtained parlour set out for tea. And whilst Maggie thawed, and drank tea, and ate buttered toast in Granny's company, the pigeon thawed too, and cooed and pecked up crumbs until it perched on the rail of a chair, turned its head

contentedly under its wing, and dropped fast asleep; and the kitten thawed too, and lapped away at a saucerful of milk, till it fell asleep on the rug; and the puppy—well, I cannot say the puppy thawed too, because he was warm and cordial when Maggie met him; but he wagged his stumpy tail, stood bolt upright and begged, munched tit-bits, barked, rolled over, and at last settled down under the table to sleep: after all which, Dame Margaret and Maggie followed the good example set them, and went to bed and to sleep.

THE END.

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